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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/C AND AF/PD

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TAGS: [CM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#)
SUBJECT: CAMEROON: IS BIYA PREPARING TO CHANGE THE
CONSTITUTION FOR A THIRD TERM?

REF: (A) YAOUNDE 1308 (B) YAOUNDE 865

Classified By: Poloff Linnisa Wahid for reasons (1.4.b & d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action message (see para 9).

[1](#)2. (C) Summary. Almost immediately after President Paul Biya returned from his October 26 meeting with French President Nicholas Sarkozy, officials at all levels of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) began calling for a constitutional amendment to remove term limits. Such an amendment would allow Biya to stay in power beyond 2011, which will mark the end of his second seven-year term under the current constitution. Key ministers, including the Ministers of Finance and Special Duties at the Presidency, joined the chorus of support for changing the constitution, which could be done with a simple majority vote in the National Assembly (where the CPDM has an overwhelming majority). Biya has deflected questions about the issue, perhaps in an effort to keep people guessing and preserve his power in the final years of his current presidential term. While there have been some voices in opposition to an amendment, overall public apathy and a weak civil society would make it relatively easy for President Biya to seek a third term. USG pressure at this time could help impact Biya's decisionmaking. End Summary.

Background

[1](#)3. (U) Section 6 of the 1996 Constitution states that the president is elected for one term of seven years and is eligible for re-election once. Although he has been in power for 25 years, President Biya was elected under the new constitution in 1997 and reelected in 2004, therefore making him ineligible to seek a third term. When asked about the 2011 elections during an October 30 France24 interview on his recent trip to Paris, Biya stated that the 2011 presidential elections were certain; however, he considered them to be far in the future, adding that Cameroon has other priorities such as the fight against corruption, HIV/AIDS and poverty and that questions about the 2011 elections were premature (ref A).

Ruling Party Calls for Amendment

[1](#)4. (SBU) Immediately after Biya's interview and the November 6 nationwide celebration of Biya's 25 years as president, regional bodies of the ruling CPDM throughout the country began calling for a constitutional amendment to remove the presidential term limits. On December 4, the CPDM Central Committee formally endorsed their appeals. A number of ministers have also voiced their support, including the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Special Duties.

Some Voices in Opposition

¶15. (SBU) Some CPDM members, opposition party leaders, NGO officials, the independent media and others in civil society have openly opposed amending the constitution. Hilaire Kamga, a prominent civil society leader, told Poloff that if there were a referendum to amend the term limits of the president, President Biya would suffer the worst defeat of his life⁸. Kamga added that that civil society was using petitions and campaigns to oppose amending the constitution. He stated that so far there were about 9,000 signatures on petitions opposing an amendment. Another civil society leader, Pauline Biyong, President of the "Patriotic Citizens Collectives" began a campaign entitled "Don't Touch My Constitution," encouraging Cameroonians to focus on President Biya's own stated priorities of fighting against corruption, HIV/AIDS and poverty instead of focusing on changing the constitution. The Sultan of Bamoun, an important traditional leader, also publicly opposed a constitutional amendment to benefit one person.

¶16. (SBU) In a December 12 newspaper article, outspoken CPDM parliamentarian, Adamou Modi, stated that he would mobilize forces and encourage them to vote against an amendment to the constitution. He said that many members of the National Assembly agreed with him, although he thought "they are not bold enough to voice their opposition". Modi is well known for publicly voicing his opposition to the reelection of the President of the National Assembly, CPDM representative Cavaye Yeguie Djibril. Former Minister of Education and key architect of the 1996 Constitution, Professor Joseph Owona, reportedly stormed out of a CPDM Central Committee meeting arguing that any genuine desire for a constitutional

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amendment should come from the people.

Next Steps

¶17. (SBU) In a December 10 meeting with Poloff, Deputy President of the Constitutional Committee in the National Assembly Zondol Hersesse outlined three possible scenarios for amending the constitution to allow Biya to run for a third presidential term. First, one third of the National Assembly could propose a bill that would remove the presidential term limits. The bill would be tabled in the general body of the National Assembly and would become law with a simple majority vote, according to Hersesse. Second, President Biya could propose a bill to the National Assembly and a simple majority vote would be needed to amend the constitution. (Note: In the 180-member National Assembly, 153 members belong to the CPDM. End Note.) Third, President Biya, in consultations with the President of the Constitutional Council and the President of the National Assembly, could propose a national referendum. A referendum on an amendment would need a simple majority of the votes cast to pass. (Note: The Constitutional Council has not yet been created. According to Vacancy Laws, the Supreme Court would assume the Council's duties. End Note.) According to Hersesse the President has not made a decision on whether to amend the constitution; he is currently "listening to the people."

Comment

¶18. (C) The outpouring of senior government and party support for changing the constitution is probably an orchestrated campaign from the top to enhance Biya's effectiveness by keeping people guessing about his future plans. As President Biya told former U.S. Ambassador Niels Marquardt, "In Cameroon anyway, once the people know when you are leaving or, worse, who will replace you, you will wield no more power" (ref B). Biya is enigmatic, has allowed more political pluralism, and may not press the issue at this

time. He deflected the question in his Paris interview and has said nothing during the debate over the past month. His close advisors have similarly deflected discussions of the topic in our private conversations. Biya's support in the National Assembly is even more overwhelming than it was before the July/September legislative elections. The opposition is timid and largely powerless and the public reaction is cynical or indifferent to the political situation. The GRC particularly values its relations with the United States and France. Our efforts to convince Biya not to change the term limits in the constitution (possibly working with the French and others), in private meetings and public settings, if done skillfully, could impact his decision making at this critical juncture.

Action

19. (SBU) Post proposes the following talking points to be used in public comments and private discussions on the issue of changing the constitution. We would appreciate Department guidance on these points:

-- I was pleased to hear President Biya say when he was in France that public attention is best focused on more pressing concerns than constitutional reform, such as the fight against corruption, poverty and HIV/AIDS. I think that is the right focus for Cameroon and is essential to generating economic growth, strengthening democracy and improving the lives of all Cameroonians.

-- Ultimately, the decision on whether to amend the Constitution is for the people and the political process of Cameroon to decide. Constitutional change requires serious deliberation and should reflect the input of all elements of society. Constitutional reform must aim to be for the benefit of the society as a whole and one should carefully weigh the long term implications of any proposed change.

-- In principle, every political system stands to benefit from new leadership and the new ideas it brings. Term limits and leadership change, at least every decade or so, are healthy ways to ensure democratic political renewal.

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